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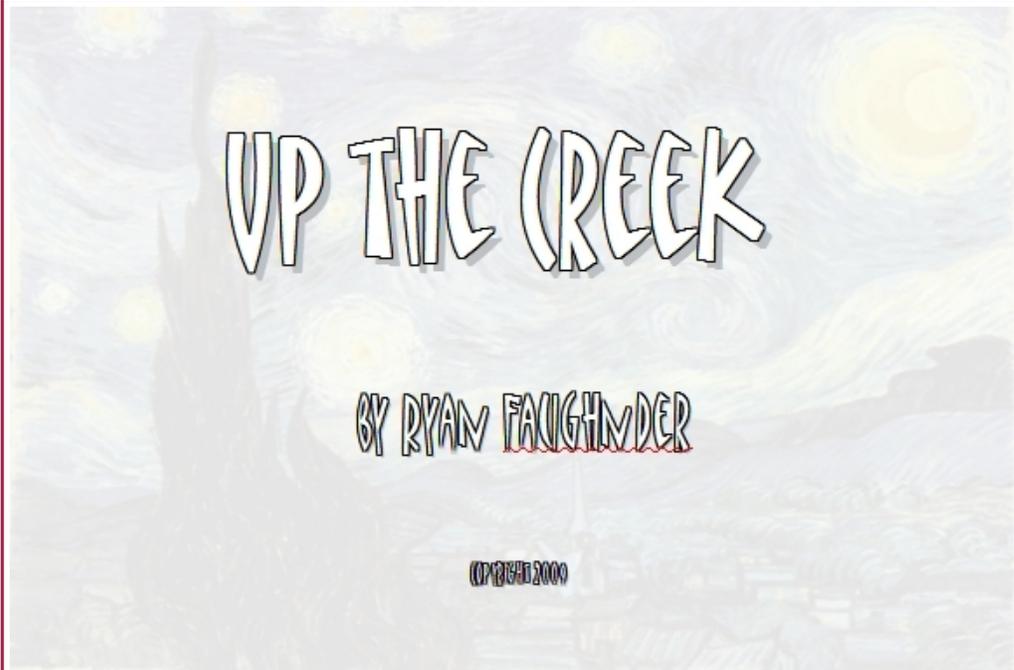
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The prospect of hiking off-trail always attracted Steve and Matt. They saw it as a chance to be rugged, to dive headfirst into the "real" wilderness where all that existed was themselves, the elements, and whatever they carried in their packs. They called it "bushwhacking."

Only a couple miles after we left our camp on the tenth day of our hike, we came to the bank of a river that sliced through our trail. We stopped and peered across to the other side, where the trail continued fifteen yards away. The canopy of branches, leaves and needles made a cool shade where we felt the chill of our own sweat and the stings of mosquitoes. The water rushed swiftly over the submerged rocks and formed a layer of white foam.

Matt took off his floppy hat and stared into the water through sunglasses that both reflected and refracted the incoming sunlight. The reflection trapped the whole scene. The whitewater. The trees. The trail. They were all there in his glasses, colored like an oil slick on asphalt.

He had received the old hat for free at a San Diego Padres game, and the team's logo was stitched in raised lettering onto the sweat-stained cloth that was riddled with a planetarium of tiny holes, which came from an incident on an earlier trip in New Mexico, during which Matt offered the hat to a camp ranger who wanted to use it in a shotgun demonstration. "Well," Matt said after the sound of the shotgun died away, "that will improve the ventilation, at least."

"I'll say," was my response. It was a phrase that, along with a receding hairline, I'd picked up from my dad, and my friends were sick of it.

Matt was not so optimistic at the edge of the river "This looks pretty shitty," he said. We couldn't see how deep the water was, but such a current was likely to knock over my 135-pound body. "You guys want to look upstream for a better place to cross?" Matt suggested.

We crossed rivers and streams at earlier in the hike, but those had either been shallow enough to ford without wetting our feet, or there had been natural bridges made of rocks or logs or islands of grass poking out through the surface.

"Well, not to be a wimp, but I just don't want to have to change my socks again," I said. "Let's go upstream. It'll kick ass."

Steve, a six-foot guy with the awkward figure of a Jenga tower, took the lead and began hiking north up the river, and the rest of us tried to follow. Our leader pulled his hat down so that the brim shielded his eyes and his nose that had been perpetually sunburned since sixth grade. The hat was a wide-brimmed, felt item in the style of Indiana Jones with a small leather strap wound like a belt around the part where the brim and the rest of the hat connected. The felt had the color of soil after a rainstorm.

Mine was the same, only sun exposure had faded it to the color of pea soup.

Steve was the kind of person who hiked faster going uphill than downhill. Maybe it was the confrontation with a challenge that pushed him to speeds that the rest of us could barely maintain on level ground. "His mind just works differently from other peoples', huh?" I said to Matt.

"Mm, hm. Steve's crazy."

"I'll say."

For an hour we followed Steve further and further off the trail. The trees became thicker, more threatening. At one point the bank seemed to disappear behind a tree as that had half of its roots in the grass and half in the water. I held the trunk as I tried to get around it on the side of the water and felt the clumps of bark poke into my fingers as I tried to find my footing on the roots that squirmed down into the river like a squid's tentacles. I wondered what would happen if I slipped feet first into the whiteness. The current grew stronger as we walked.

"Jesus," I said, exhausted. "What the hell are we looking for?"

Steve took off his hat and came to a halt at a small clearing where a rotting, moss-blanketed log stretched across the river about two feet above the stream. The bottom of the log was soaked by the river's spray. When I caught up to Steve, he had placed one foot on the wood and his hand on his raised knee. He seemed to be posing for a Captain Morgan ad.

Having known Steve for eight years and having sat next to him in AP English for a full semester, I expected him to turn to me and say how the river was so much like something Herman Hesse would have written about and how it could represent something profound about life and spirituality, how rivers in books always are alive and how the way a person crosses a river says so much about that person that is true, though nebulous. But, he didn't. Instead, he turned to us and asked the practical question, "How does this look?"

Matt stood next to Steve and checked out the log. "Looks okay to me," he said. Steve's forehead – still red and indented where the hat had been – crinkled with uncertainty, and he noted that the log bent when he stepped on it.

"That doesn't exactly look sturdy," I said.

"We've got to be at least two miles off the trail," Matt said. "We cross here, or we turn back."

Steve looked back at the log and slipped his thumbs between his shoulder straps and his chest as he shrugged. "OK, then. I guess I'll go over first," he said as he cinched the straps.

I responded, "Go for it."

Then he did what our dads had always told us to do whenever crossing a body of water. He unbuckled the strap that hugged his waist and the strap across his sternum so that, if he fell in, the sixty-pound backpack would not pull him under the surface and pin him below the suffocating current. If someone had made a drawing of this procedure, it could have gone into

the Boy Scout handbook.

He stepped tentatively onto the log. I held my breath as the middle of the log buckled under him like a tight rope with each step, and the drops of water fell from the bottom and became lost in the racing foam. Halfway across. He tried to use his hiking pole as a third leg, but it slipped and swiped through the air as he wobbled for balance.

Matt stood reverently next to me with his shot up hat over his chest. I could hear a small ringing of panic in my ears like a dog whistle as he got closer and closer to the opposite bank. If he fell in, there would be no one to help him to the other side and, when I realized this, a feeling of helplessness sank into me.

But his boot pressed the grass on the other side and he leapt off the log. I thought I would cross next. In a rare moment, I silently thanked God for making me short and giving me a low center of gravity. But Matt had already placed himself in the on-deck circle.

The log bent lower under his first step and I thought I heard a crack in the wood. He took some of the weight off and looked back at me. "Here I go," he said as he placed the floppy hat on his hairless head so the cap leaned upstream. I laughed a little. Matt was well over six feet tall, and his pack was 75 pounds. The pack was boxy and filled to its capacity so that his body was hardly visible from the bank, except for the legs and elbows. From behind, he looked like a walking mattress.

His pace was steadier and more confident than Steve's, but the soles of his boots were so wide that they actually hung off the side the log. I could hear almost nothing now but the flushing sound of the water and the buzzing in my ears.

I never heard the splash. Matt's right foot slipped on the moss, and his body dropped until he was straddling the log. He fell to the left, upstream, and then he was in the water. His pack pile-drove him under the surface. Then, like a seal fleeing a predator, a hand shot through the foam, and a bald head followed. Matt screamed one word: "Fuck!"; and his hand missed the log and he went under again.

The second time he burst back through the surface, his arm hooked against the side of log and held on as the current sucked his legs under.

If his glasses had stayed over his eyes, I'm sure I still would have seen the fear that exploded out of them. Anybody could have seen through the glasses that reflected and refracted the wilderness before them and seen the emotion, or if not, they would have projected their own horror onto those reflective surfaces. But the river had carried the glasses away, and I saw naked terror.

Somehow, he gained his footing on the rocks and stood up with his arms wrapped around the fallen tree and braced himself against the current. His hat was clenched in hand. The rapids that flew under the log threatened to suck him down and trap him between the wood and the rocks.

At that moment I remembered a day when my father and I went fishing on the Kern River, and a ranger told us that a woman had died while gliding down white water on a little, donut-shaped inner tube. She had been thrown out of the tube by a bump in the current, and her leg had become trapped underneath the rock that created the swell. Her husband and several other companions realized what had happened and sent one person to get help while those who remained created a long human chain, each person holding onto an ankle, so that the husband could pull out his wife. She drowned before they got anywhere near her. When I first heard the story, I thought of how easily the entire chain could have died.

As Matt's body took the river's force, Steve threw off his pack, grabbed his hiking pole and slid down the bank to the place where the log connected with his side of the river, and he held the pole over the water. The pole waved with the wind, as if to dodge Matt's free hand as he grabbed for it. Matt took hold of the metal, finally, and Steve pulled against the current like he was reeling in a huge catch.

At the same time, there mixture of emotions that surged through me, a numbing cocktail of panic and distance from the action. I felt afraid, but what I saw seemed almost like a reenactment, something you might see on the History Channel. Helplessness. This river had tried to hurt my friend, and it blocked me from doing anything about it.

I realized I had to forgo the bridge and wade across. I ran down stream for twenty yards until I found a safe spot, and I held myself up against the waist-deep water that clawed at me. It was frigid. And when I reached their side of the river, I ran in water-logged boots – my feet both numb and stinging like running on steel wool – to where Steve and Matt sat.

Steve, in seconds, had gotten our friend out of his soaked clothes, which now lay in a pile next to him. He had dried Matt off as best he could and helped him into new nylon convertibles, a dry shirt, some wool socks and a synthetic fleece jacket. Though Matt's pack had gone completely underwater, the bag that contained his clothing had remained dry. He sat on the bare dirt with his ankles crossed like a shaman's, and his convulsing arms wrapped around his knees, which also shook because the river had sucked the heat from his body. He was silent.

If Steve had not gotten him into dry clothes, hypothermia would have taken hold in minutes. On top of the fleece jacket, there was a growing layer of feasting mosquitoes, and their combined, moving mass made it seem as if the jacket were a living thing, breathing with the twitches of the insects. The mosquitoes were nature's last insult to our pride, the final punch-line in a sadistic roast.

Matt's floppy hat lay upside-down on the ground. The water was still leaking out of the holes, and dirt particles became caught in its sieve.

As Matt shivered inside his fleece and I sat down to remove my boots, I looked at the hat that lay next to my friend and considered how much trauma that one object had experienced in its short life. A drowning. A shooting. Various animal attacks. It had been through a Triple Crown of near-death experiences that I believed I could never handle. The greatest trial my hat had even faced was sun damage.

Matt finally spoke: "That was so fucking stupid."

"I'll say."

"Shut up, Faughnder."

The hike from the river to our campsite was calm. We walked for eleven miles, as if nothing unusual had happened, even though the incident played in my head on repeat until we arrived at our next campsite. With each replay, as the feeling returned to my toes, the river became wider, faster, more violent. The distance grew between where I stood on the bank and where my best friends pulled against the river whose flow was powerful enough to dig that deep cut through which it flowed for centuries. Eroding. Clawing. Creating. And, every time it played over, they still won.

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